

Yearling Nutritional Management

Why do we continue to see so many malnourished yearlings in the 21st century? Are breeders and owners neglecting this stage in a horse's life? Once they are weaned, are these yearlings being sent to the back pasture 'til it's time to bring them back up and get them ready for training?

Surely with the big emphasis on having horses ready to perform at 2 and 3 in futurities and other events, it is critical that care be taken to maximize the genetic potential for growth and development. To be sure, most managers feel that they are providing the proper feed for these young horses. So, why do so many of them look so bad?

The answer is not just in providing the proper ration, it is related to getting them to eat the right feed components in the correct amounts. To translate this concept into human terms, it is not the food that is put on the table, it is food that toddlers are convinced to eat. Do they only eat mashed potatoes or can you convince them to nibble on cauliflower rather than hide it in their underwear?

This is what nutritional management is all about - designing ways to help each horse be the best he can be at each stage of his life.

To become a yearling, every horse must make a transition from a liquid to a solid diet. Just like the young human child, the young horse must be taught to eat what is good for him.

A young horse learns to eat by following his mother's lead. He nibbles on what she eats. Eating grain with his dam is one of the best ways to get the weanling on feed before weaning.

But Nature has another plan. The young horse left to its genetic program will fill its belly with its natural foodstuff - grass and hay. This worked when the young horse had access to milk and pasture. But take away milk as the primary source of nutrients and we have to intervene and teach the young horse to eat grain and make it the primary source of nutrients.

One of the ways to make grain the focal point of a young horse's diet to limit its access to pasture and hay while it is learning to eat grain.

By limiting a weanling's hay ration to between a half and a whole flake of hay a day, it won't be long until it craves grain over hay.

Once the young horse has been taught to eat grain, the next key to proper yearling nutritional management is to provide the right diet. Young horses up to 12 months of age need to be fed a diet composed of 16% protein. This means that his total daily ration (both hay and grain) needs to contain 16% protein.

The rest of his yearling year between 13 and 24 months, the young horse needs a ration containing 14% protein.

The correct level of protein is critical for proper growth and development. A properly balanced ration for yearlings will be composed of high quality protein amino acids along with the crucial balance of vitamins and minerals.

The final step in yearling nutritional management is to provide a feeding environment that allows every horse access to eating what it needs.

Many yearlings from the youngest to the oldest are fed in group feeding situations.

This plan is usually doomed to fail. The oldest or the most dominant yearlings usually get most of the food. The youngest or most submissive are run off left to nibble on grass and hay to fill their bellies.

An even worse scenario occurs when yearlings are fed with horses of all ages. 99% of all yearlings are submissive to older horses. In addition, they eat slower.

Even if the feeding stations are 40 feet apart and there are 5 more feeding stations than horses, the yearlings are not going to get all the nutrition they need. And chances are, the grain that is being fed to the whole herd is not one specially designed for yearlings.

The bottom line: Yearlings can look great if you provide the right diet and create a management system that allows them to eat it.

— Dr. Jim and Lynda McCall

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